Mélisande

Mélisande

FOREWORD AND STORY BY *Margery Sharp*

DRAWINGS BY *Roy McKie*

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Foreword

TO SPEAK WITH any assumption of intimacy concerning the great artist known as Mélisande is, alas, impossible. A most loyal and unselfish comrade — a "perfect pet" in the rehearsal room — she nonetheless hedged every private thought and emotion with a delicate reticence which none could fail to respect and beyond which only a cad would attempt to pry. Many of her relations are still living — it is known she was one of a numerous family — but they too have preserved the same dignified and, (may one say it?), rare discretion. What follows is thus no more than a brief sketch of the great diva's dazzling, all-too-brief public career.

It may be recorded, however, that neither Mélisande's parents nor her siblings showed any marked musical talent. They in fact devoted themselves chiefly to open-air sports. In this, as in so much else, Mélisande obeyed no known rules of heredity. Whence the divine spark descended, who knows? One can only marvel, and, gratefully, rejoice.

MÉLISANDE first made acquaintance with that other great diva, Rosa Bel Canto, in circumstances at once unusual and pathetic: and how was the latter's kindness rewarded! But even she, though instantly perceiving a worthwhile future for her protégée, was completely astounded when only six months later Mélisande proved able to sustain the rôle of Mimi in *La Bohème*. A perfect ear, however, and perfect

pitch, combined with unremitting practice, made it possible: and no one who witnessed her début will ever forget the calm authority with which she first set foot upon the operatic boards. I myself remember as vividly as if it were yesterday the face of a banker * in the next box as those first enchanting notes floated forth. To say he was overcome is an understatement. But so were we all overcome. No one had ever heard, or seen, anything like it! From that moment, Mélisande's triumph was assured.

Triumph after triumph followed. A pure lyric soprano — *leggiero*, never *sfogato* — Wagner was beyond her, and wisely she recognized her limitations; but within them reigned supreme over a devoted following. (I have it on good authority† that "Mad about Mélisande" buttons were worn as commonly in an opera house as tiaras — perhaps even *more* commonly.) To have heard Mélisande, to be able to get seats for a Mélisande night, became as much a status symbol as ditto for *My Fair Lady* in its first month — but with an added cultural *cachet*. The acclaim of the critics too was outstanding. To quote but a few among many:

". . . her voice is one of those rare organs that can convey meaning and emotion without the aid of language . . ."

". . . nothing conventional in her acting; indeed it is wholly original . . ."

". . . one can but repeat what was said of Madame Calvé" (the reference here to Santuzza, *Cavalleria Rusticana*) — *"only she brought out the true doglike nature of this pathetic character . . ."*

To which let us add the tribute of Mélisande's teacher, and in many cases conductor, Signor A. di Scala, as recently recorded on television.

"Of all the voices under my care, that of Mélisande was pre-eminent for both purity of tone and a natural *portamento*. *Portamento* is not a sausage, ha ha! *Portamento* is something very rare, very exquisite, and in its effects upon the music understander comparable to the thrill

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* Mr. Winthrop van Hoyt van Dine, President, Tenth Manhattan.
† Miss Mignonette Hughes, Secretary, Gallery Girls Opera Club.

received by apes from bebop. To the sublime artist whom I had the honor to instruct, such a comparison, I am happy to say, would have meant nothing. Not only a pure, uncorrupted voice was offered me, but an equally pure and uncorrupted intelligence. If between us we achieved greatness, the credit must be chiefly Mélisande's; for myself, I ask no more reward than to have shown her the way."

Come back, Miss Mignonette Hughes, for the same program!

"Oo, she was *sweet!* The one time I ever got into her dressing room I'd twenty-three auto-books — twenty-two naturally belonging to other Girls — and she signed every one. 'Oo, won't it make you inky?' I said. 'I do hope I'm not presuming?' She just smiled and went on signing. 'Oo!' I said — I mean, what else *could* I say? And she said 'Oo!' right back to me, which I shall ever treasure as my most precious memory of Grand Op."

ACCLAIM of critics, acclaim of the multitude; why then did Mélisande quit so early — nay, prematurely — the scene of her success? The short, yet all-embracing, answer is, because she was Mélisande. She was of course also nearly four — another rarity among prime donne, she never made any secret of her age — and though at the peak of her vocal powers, had undoubtedly begun to feel the strain of so arduous a profession. For its "glamour" she cared not at all: her tastes were so simple, at the very height of her fame a biscuit soaked in bouillon was a feast to Mélisande, a bow of ribbon gave her as much pleasure as a diamond necklace. Nevertheless, her decision to retire stemmed essentially from such high and unselfish principles as all must respect even while they deplore.

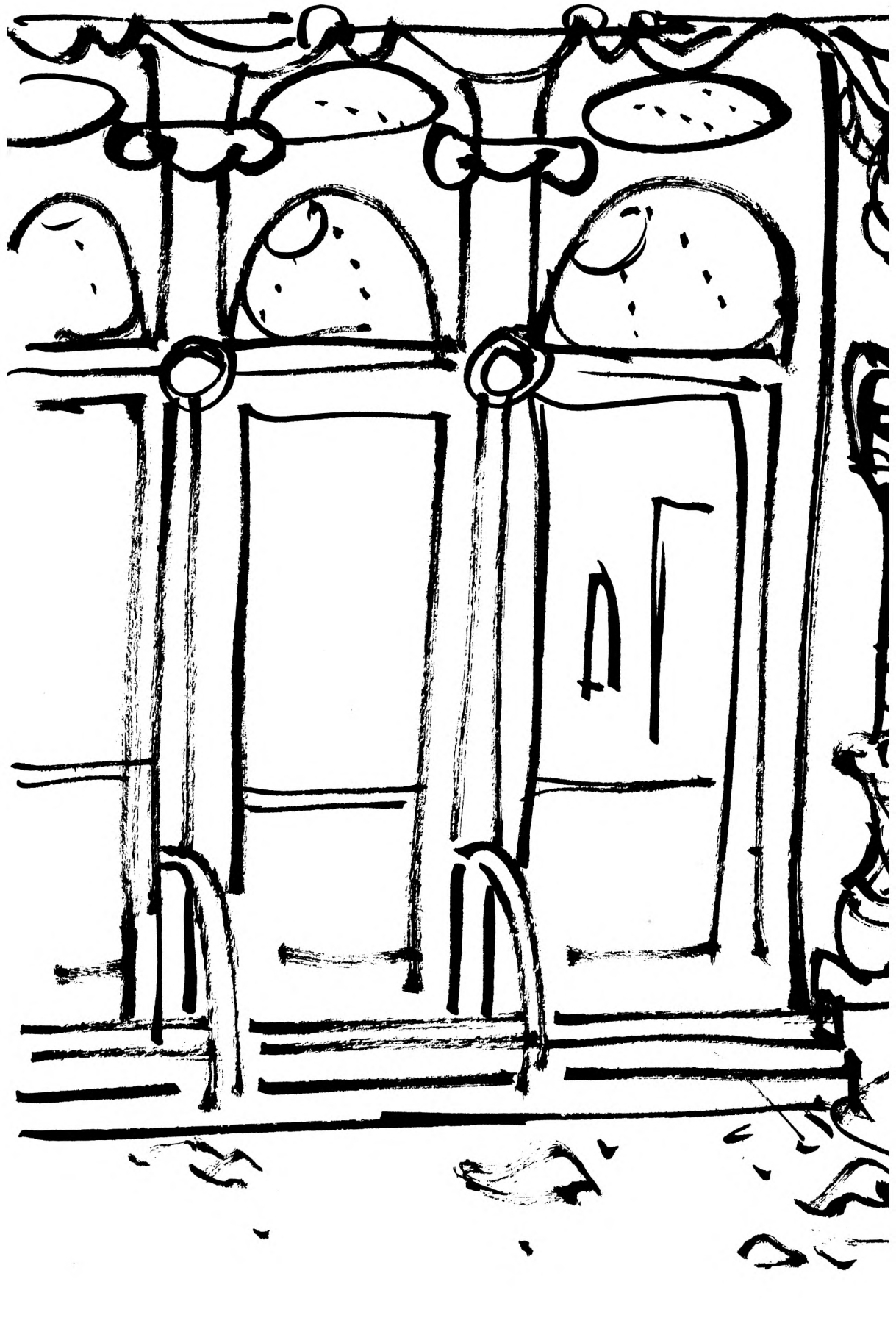
Yet there remained another moral aspect. Had Mélisande the *right* to deprive her public of that glorious voice? The press of two hemispheres debated the point while opera lovers almost came to blows! Nowhere was the debate more anguished than in Mélisande's own breast. It was the writer's privilege to sit night after night with her, listening to her heart-searchings. What a lovely spirit they revealed!

The floor would be littered with contracts; not all of them weighed one half so much with Mélisande as a single plea on cheap notepaper from some humble admirer. I am myself convinced that it was these — these hundreds upon hundreds of modest appeals — some signed merely "Music Teacher," or "First Trombone," or "Mother of Six" — that finally swayed her. She could *not* remain silent!

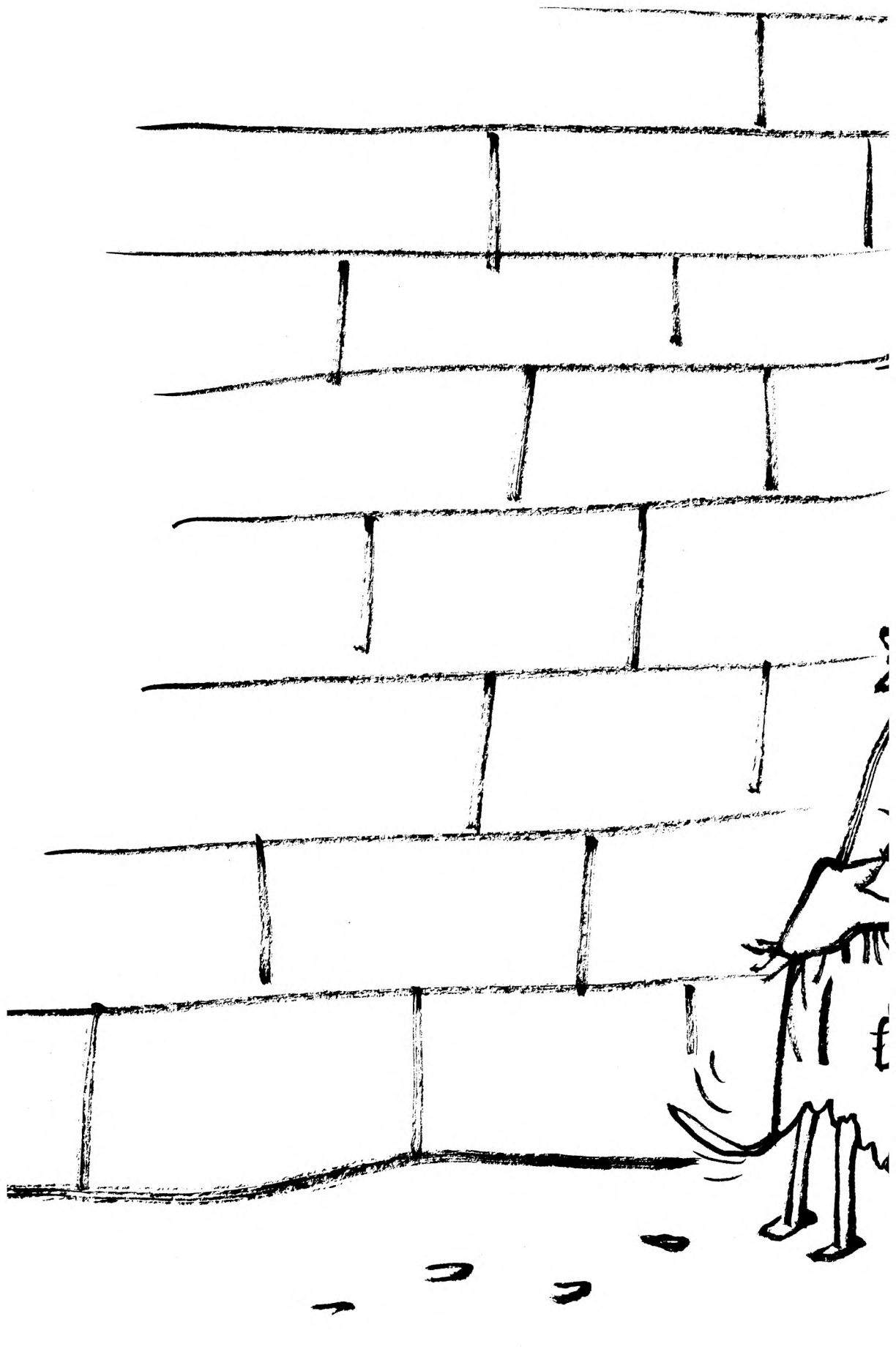
Nor has she. But only Mélisande, in her selfless integrity, could have found the answer to satisfy us all. Thanks due to Signor A. di Scala, the International Kennel Club, Miss Mignonette Hughes, Miss Julie Andrews and Shy (actually a distant connection of Mélisande's), also and especially to Mr. Roy McKie, sympathetic illustrator of this inadequate memoir.

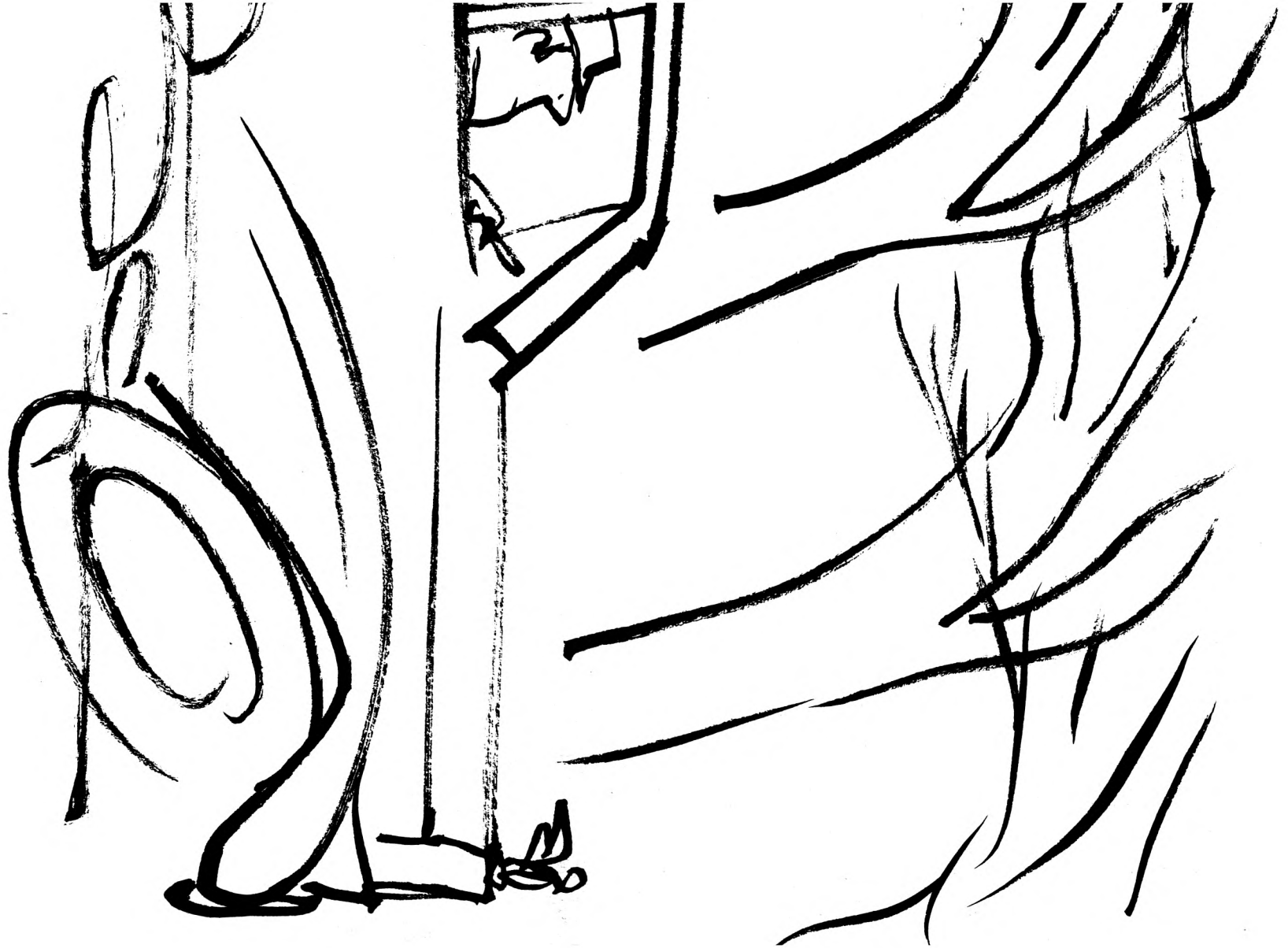
MARGERY SHARP

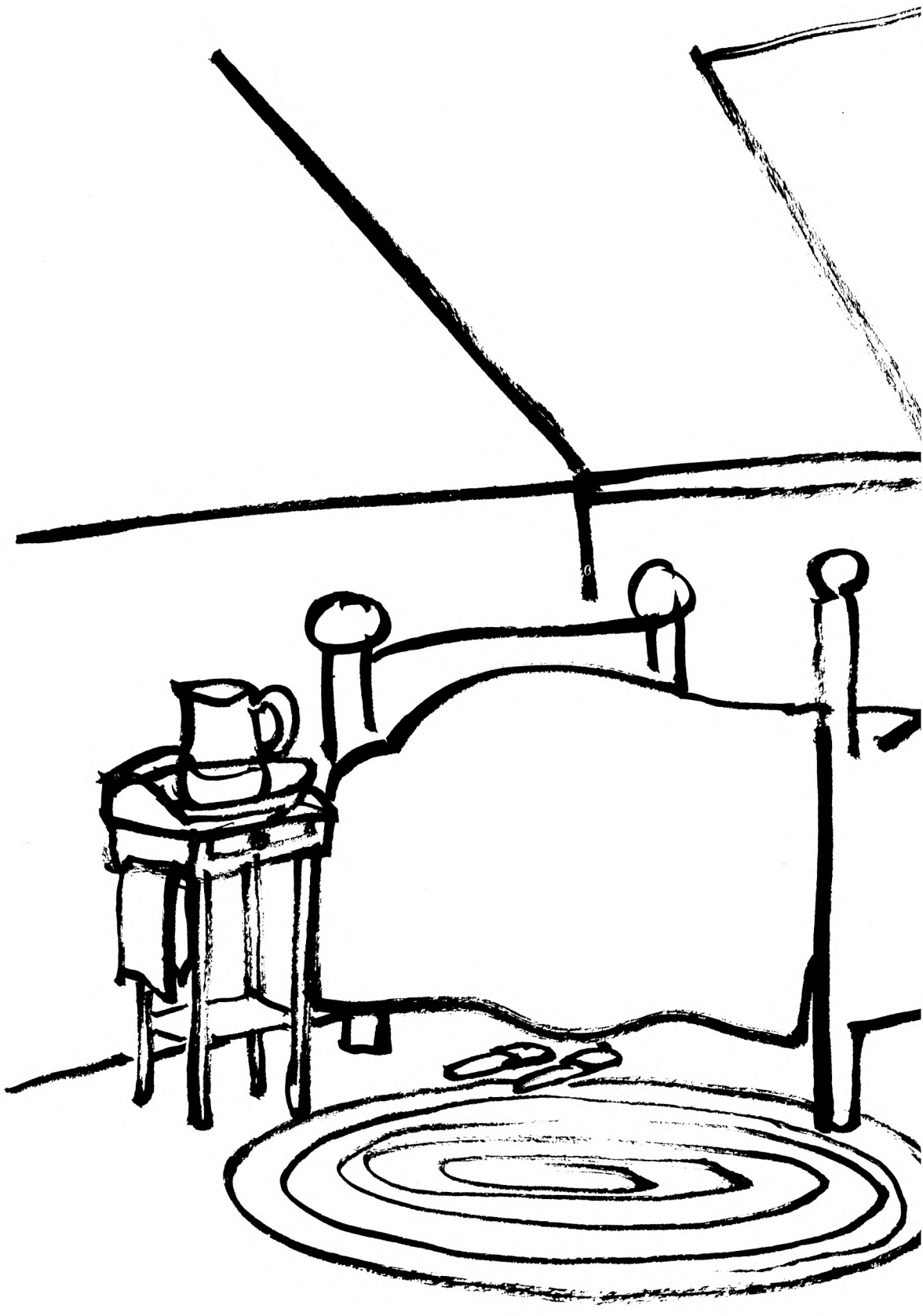
Mélisande

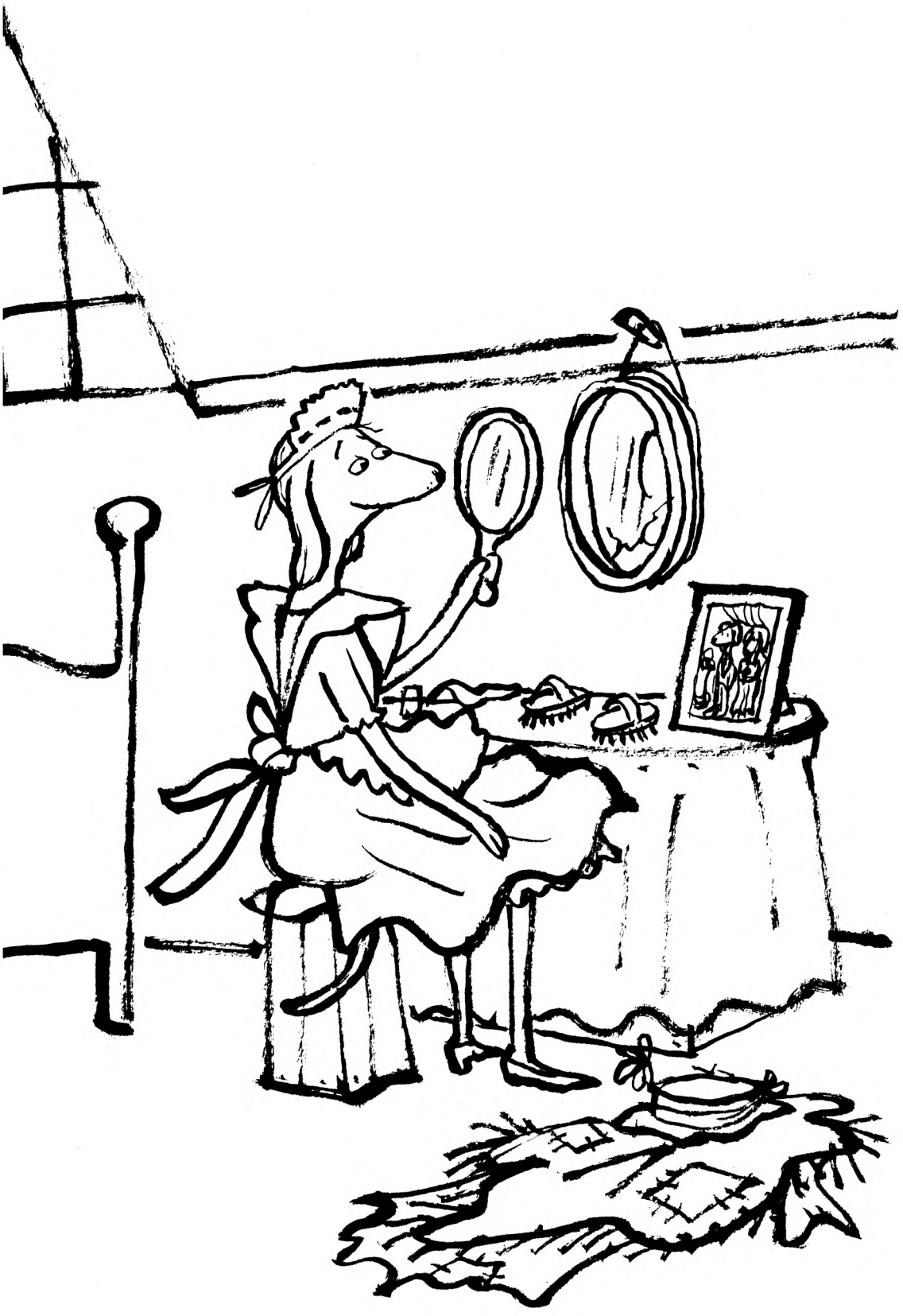


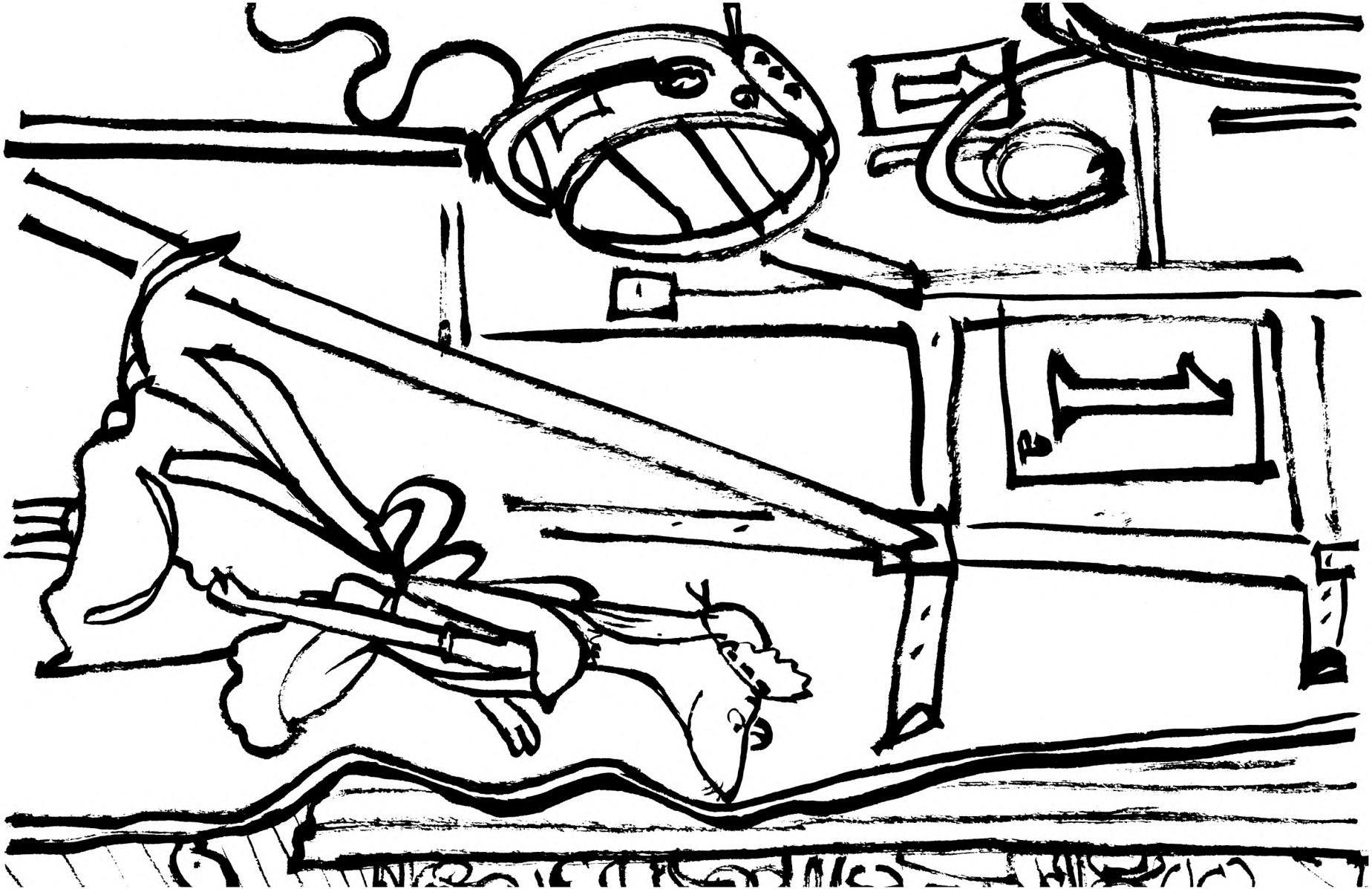
OPERA
ROSA BEL CANTO



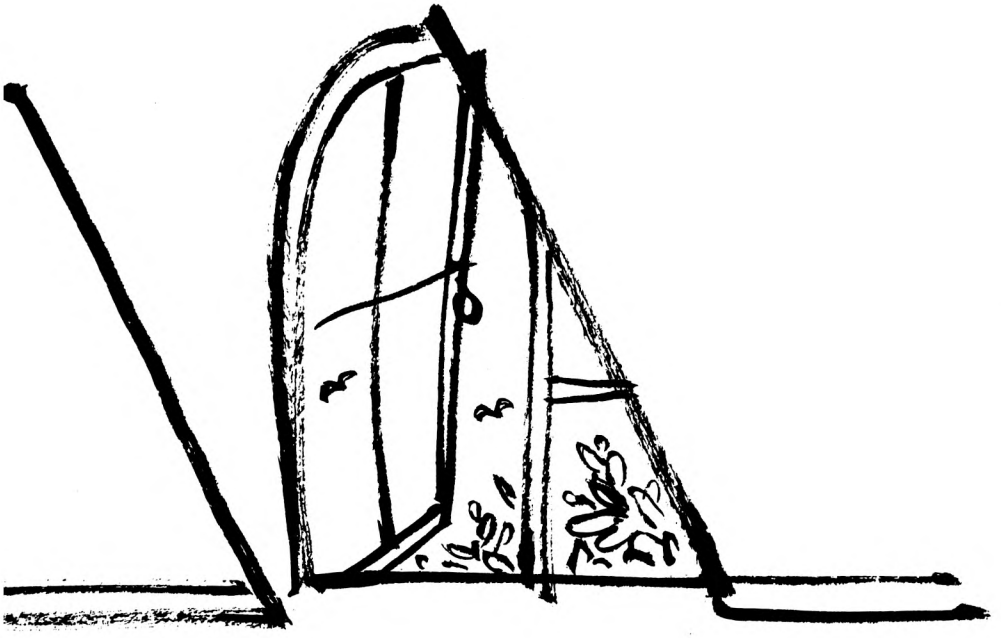


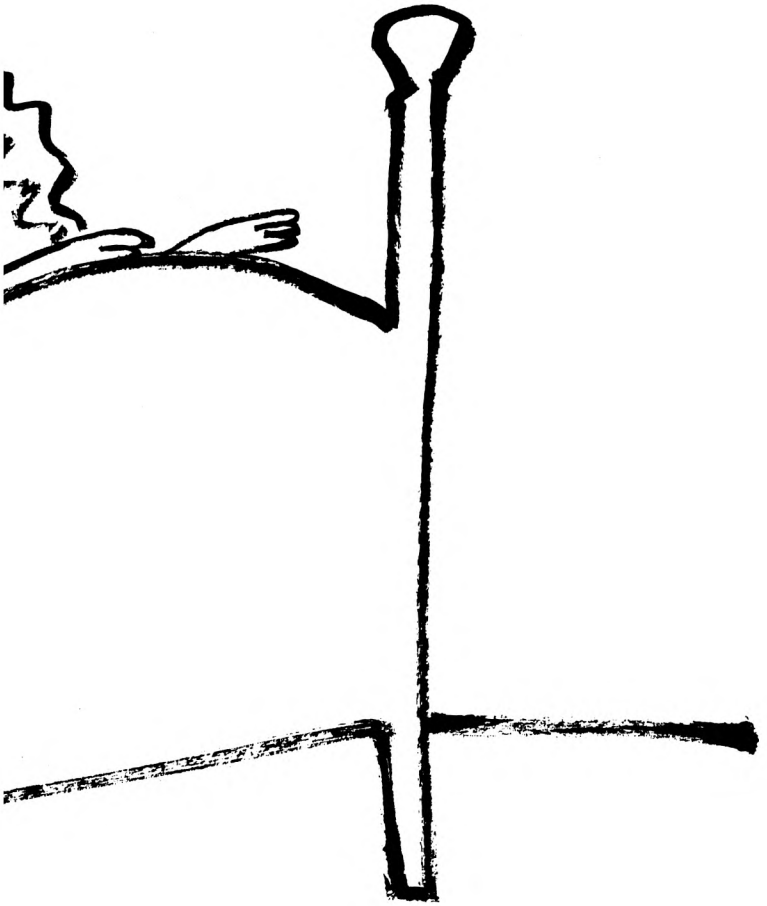




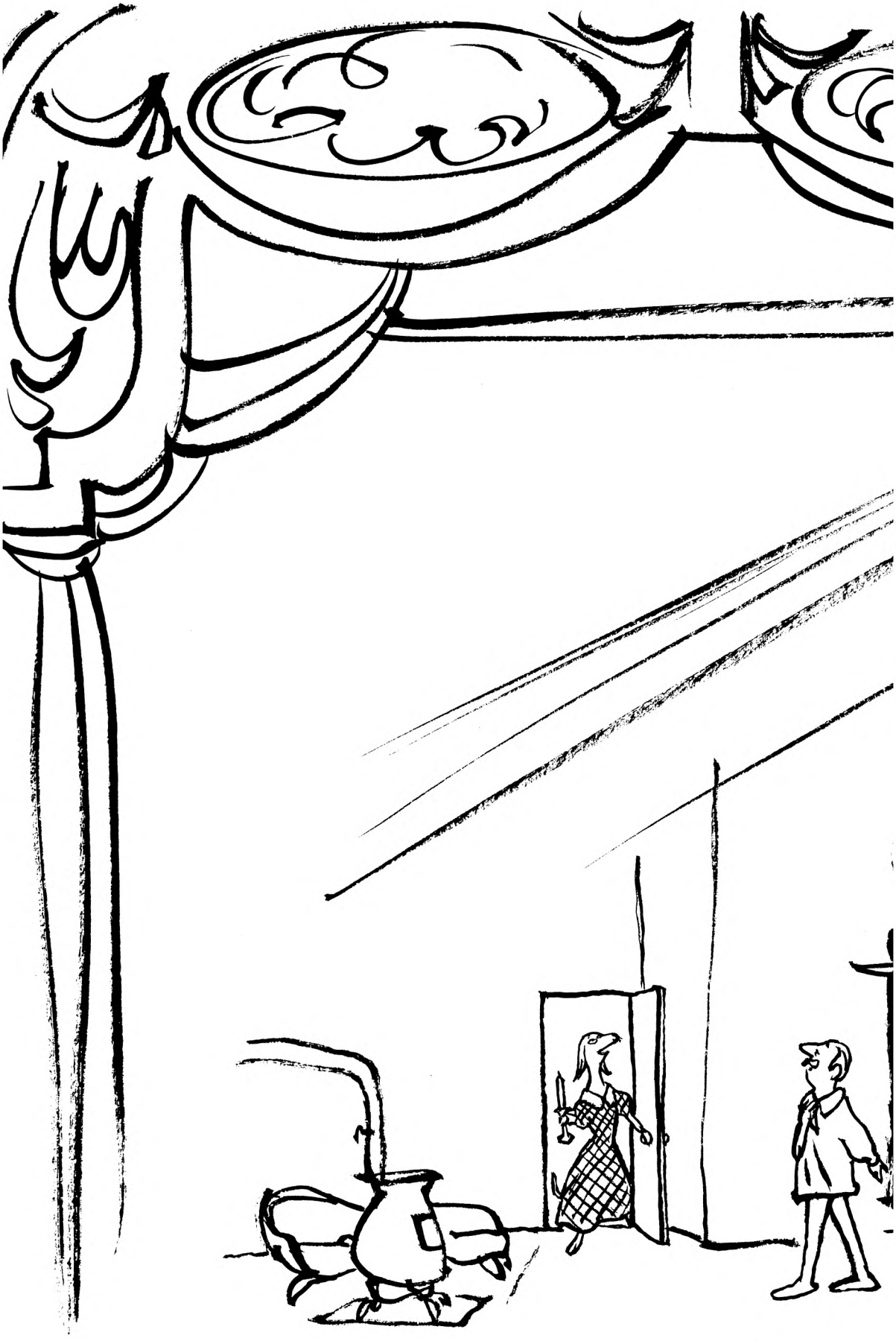


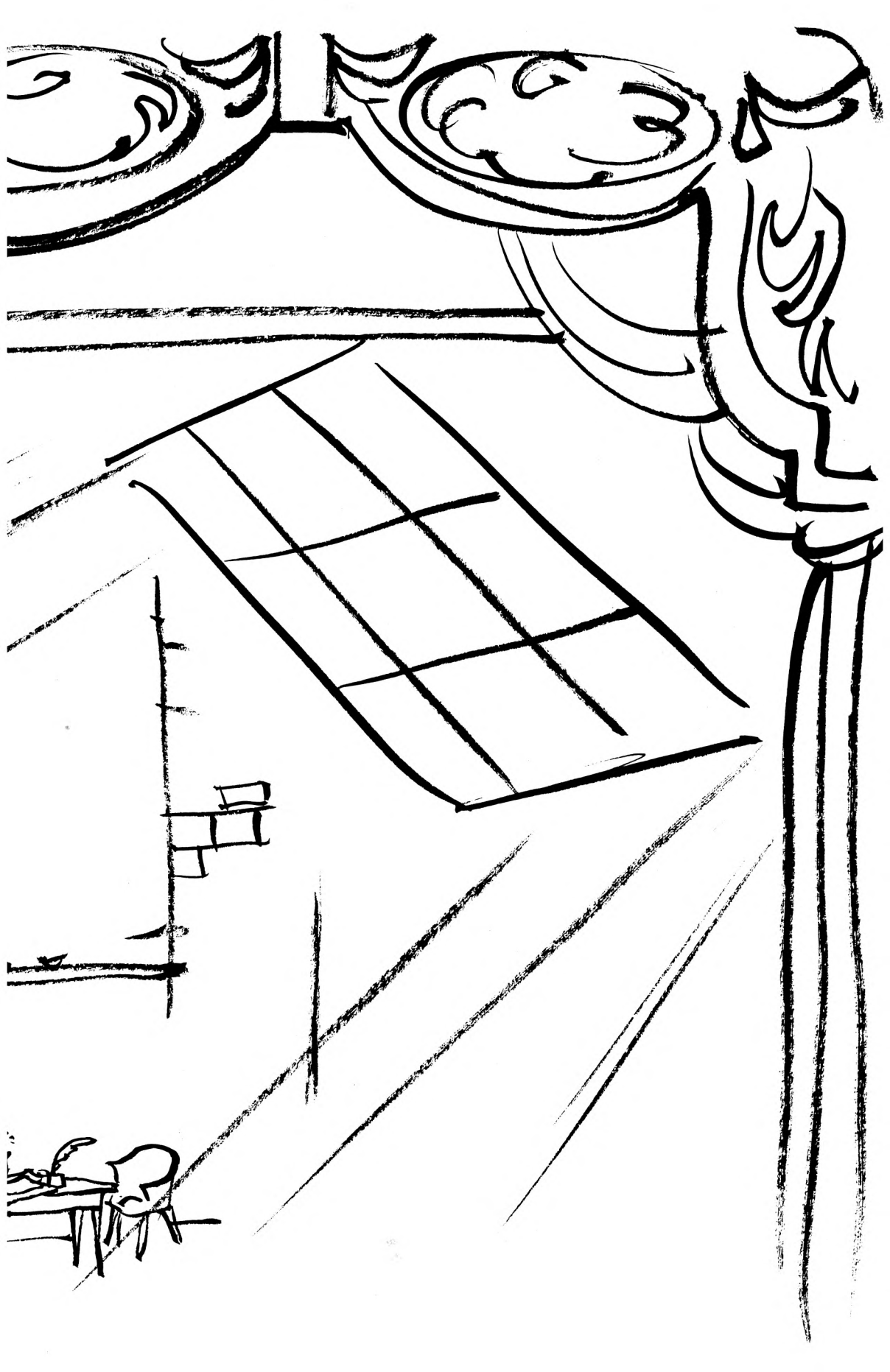
OPERA

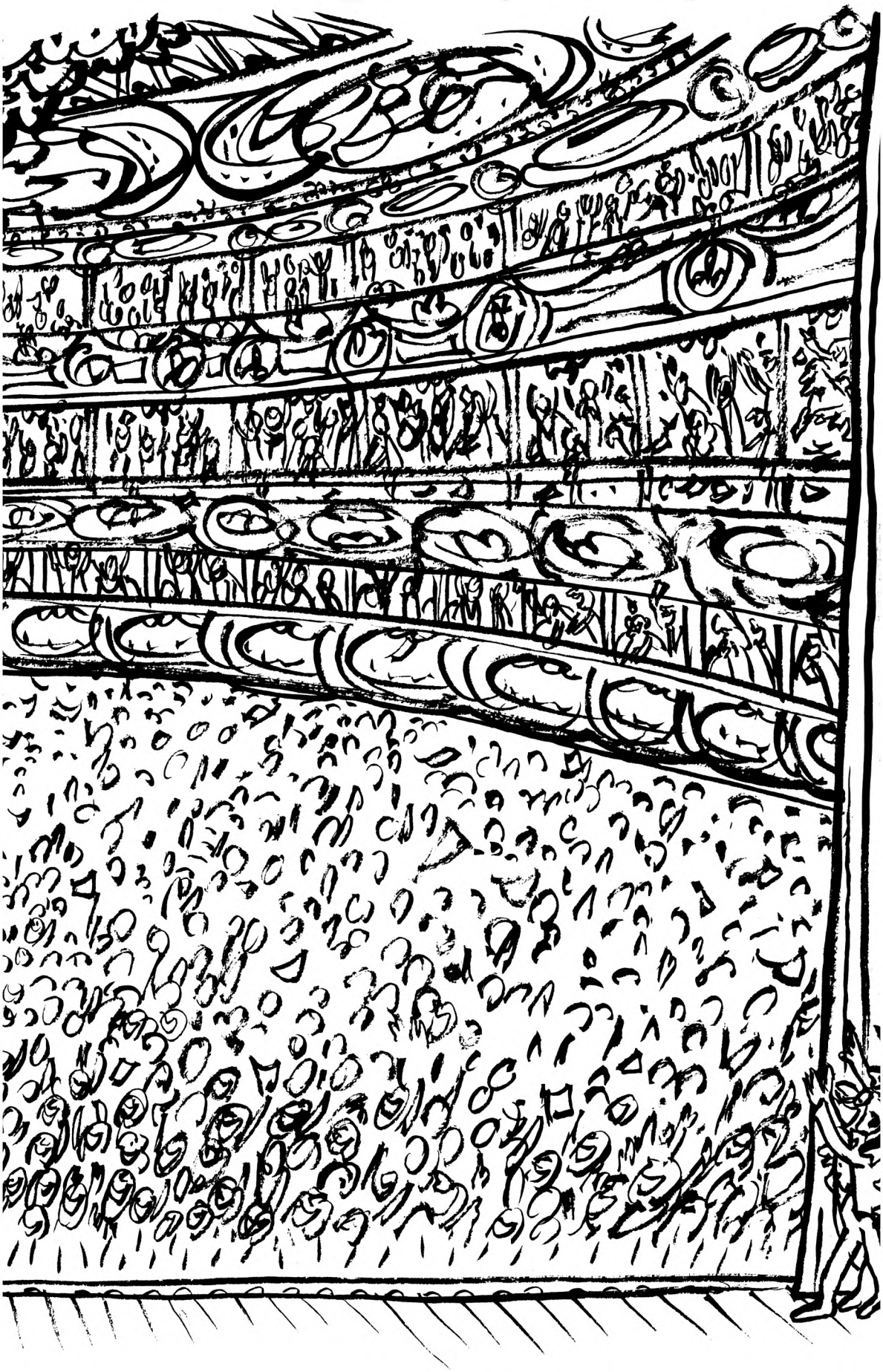




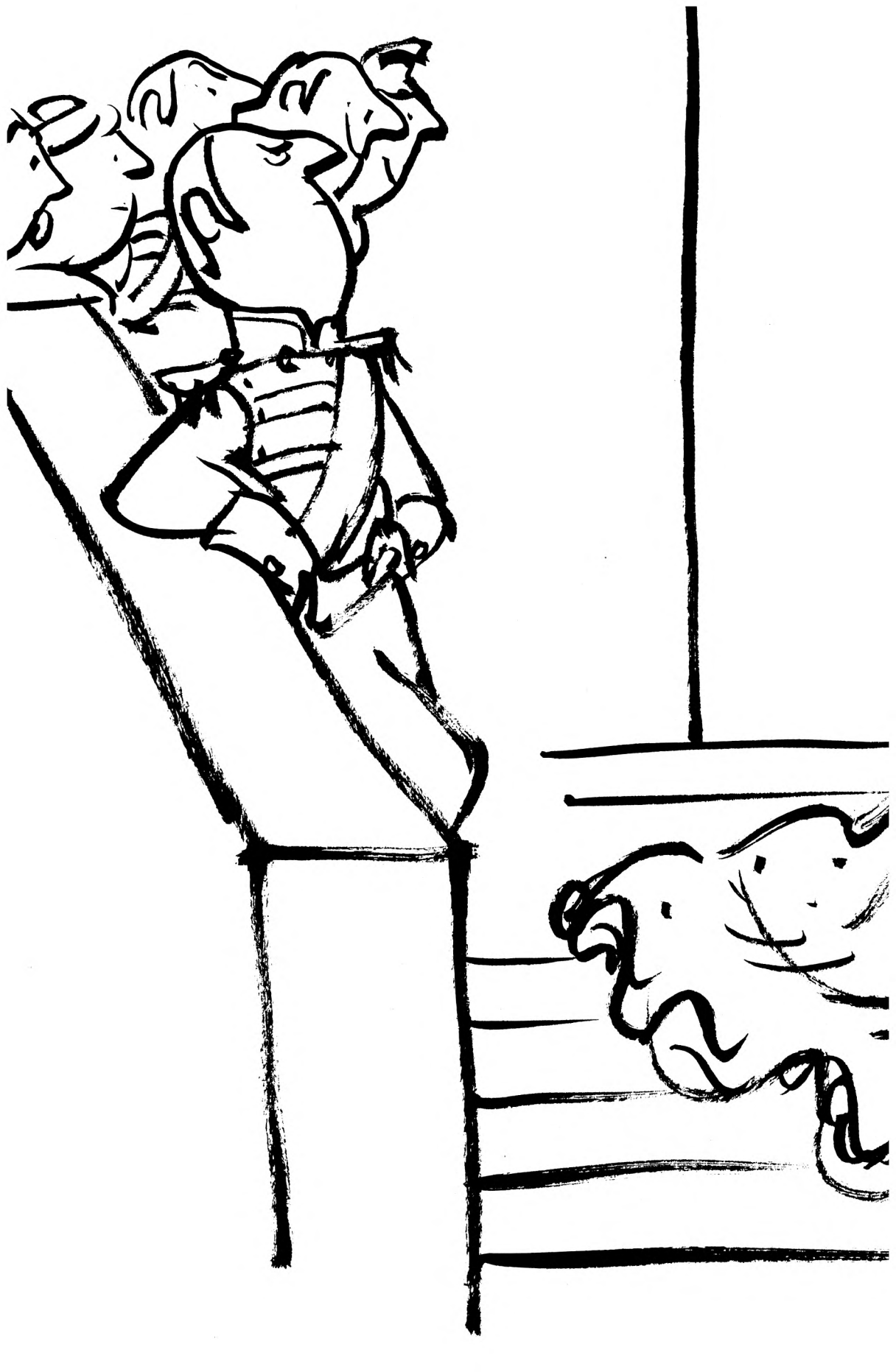
La Bohèm
MIMI

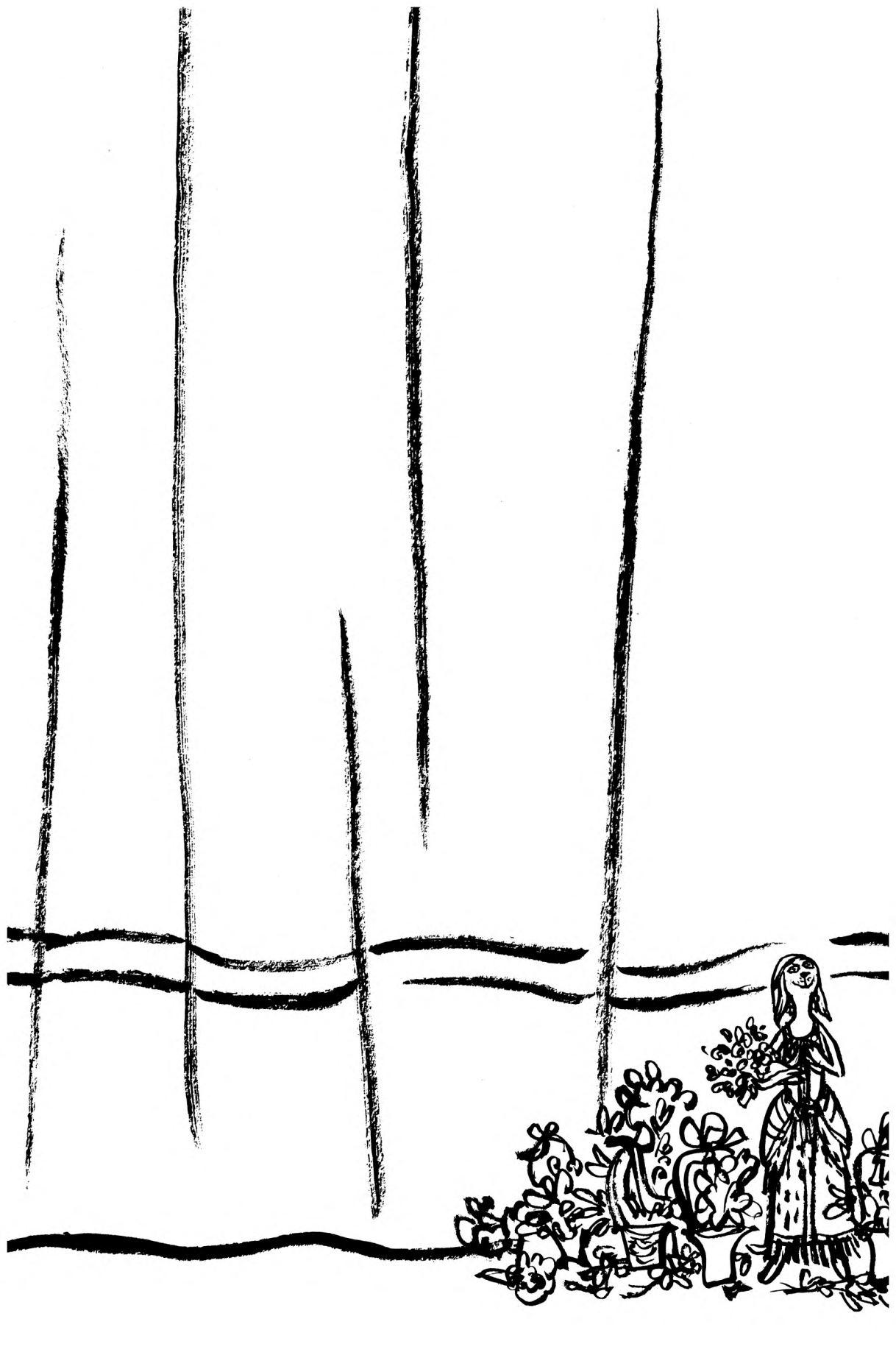


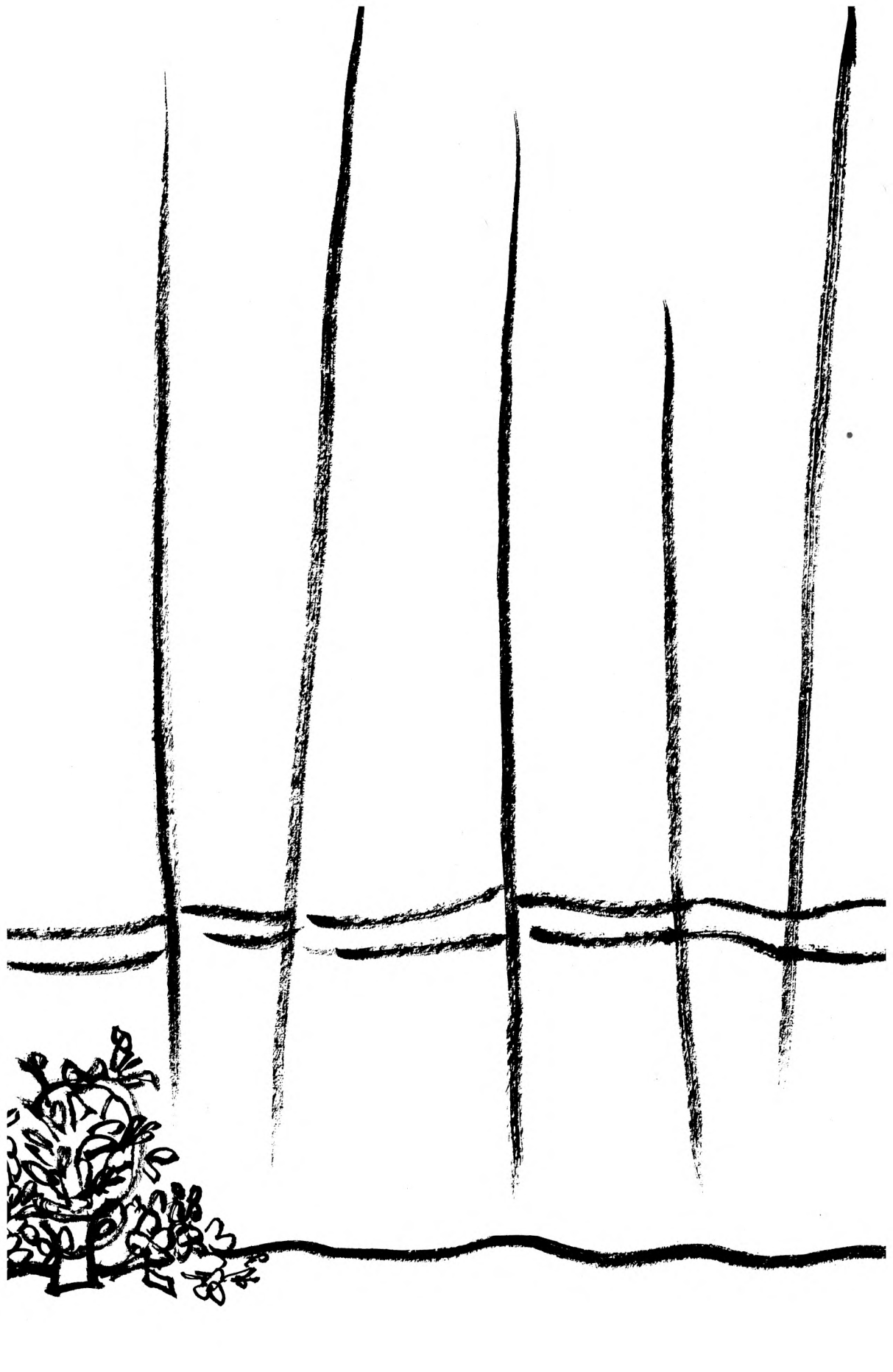


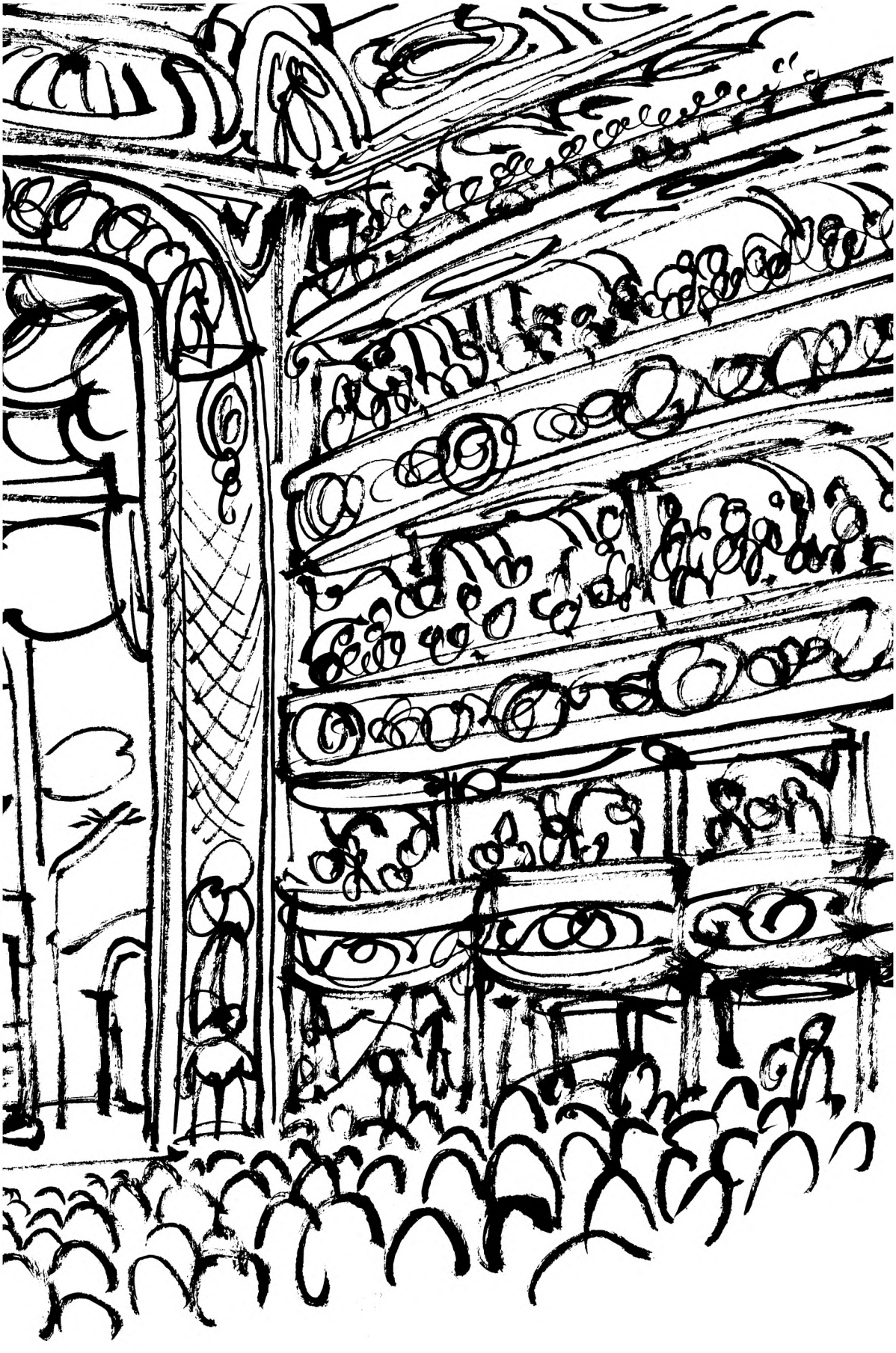


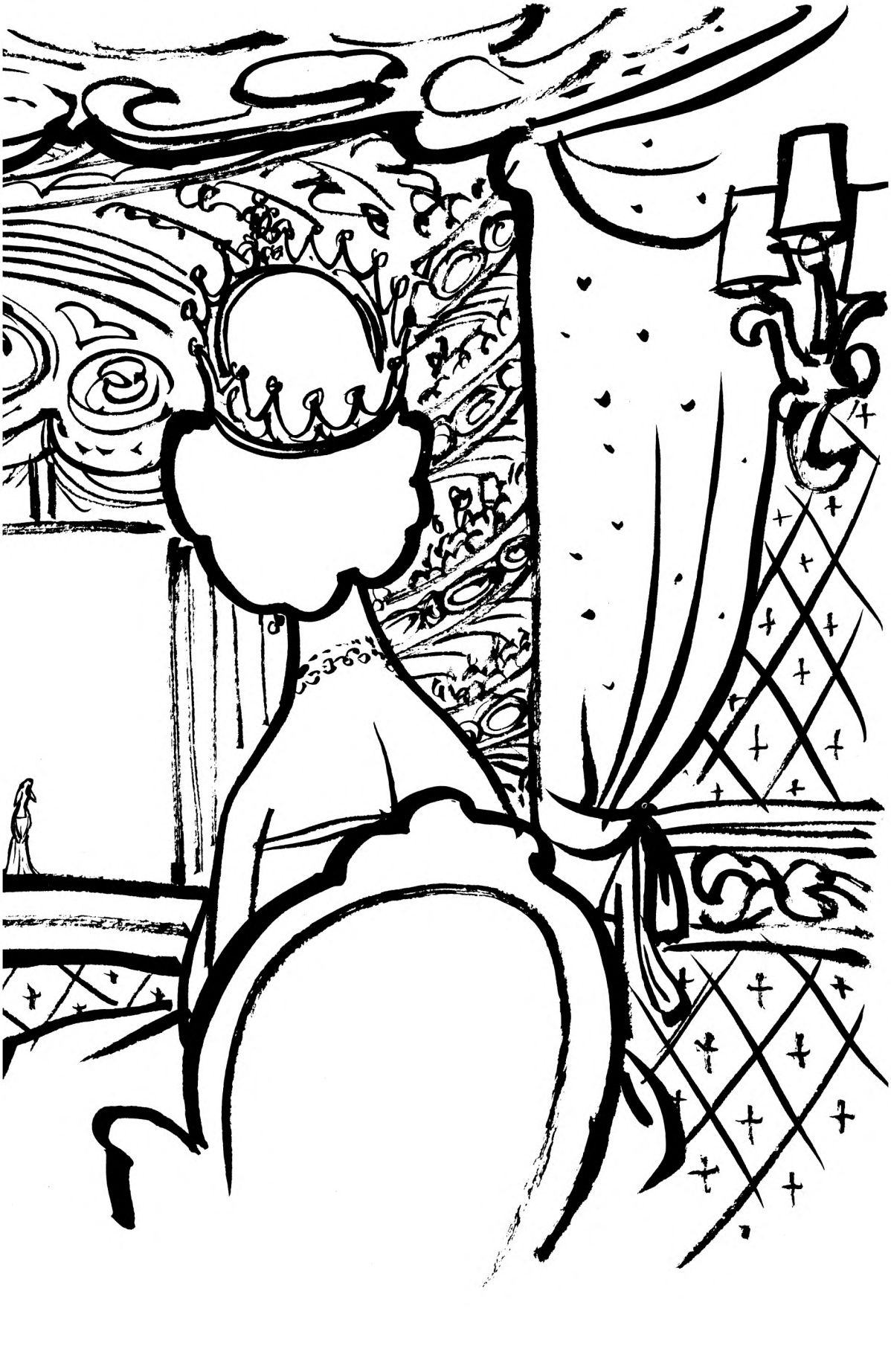
Contract

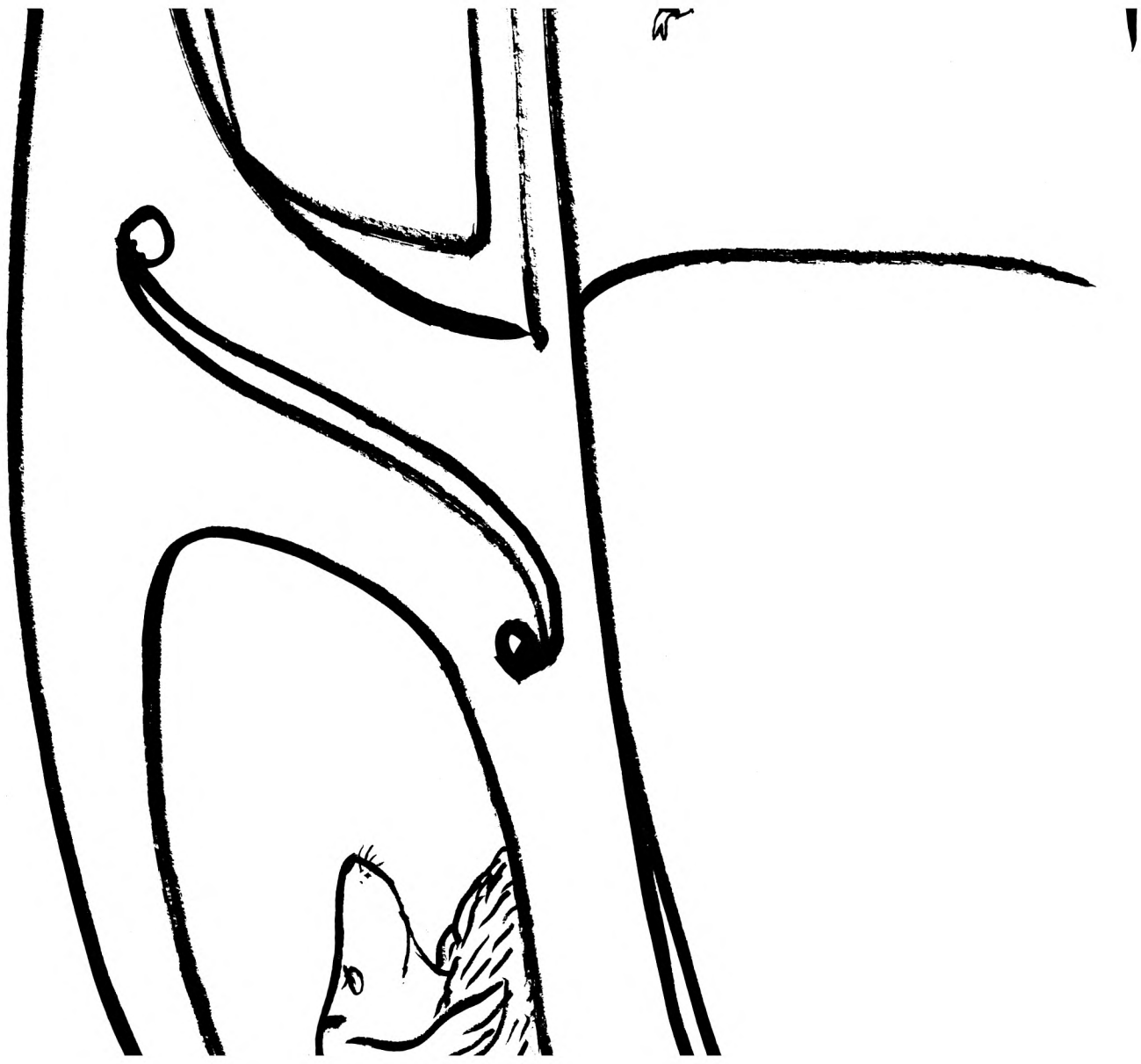


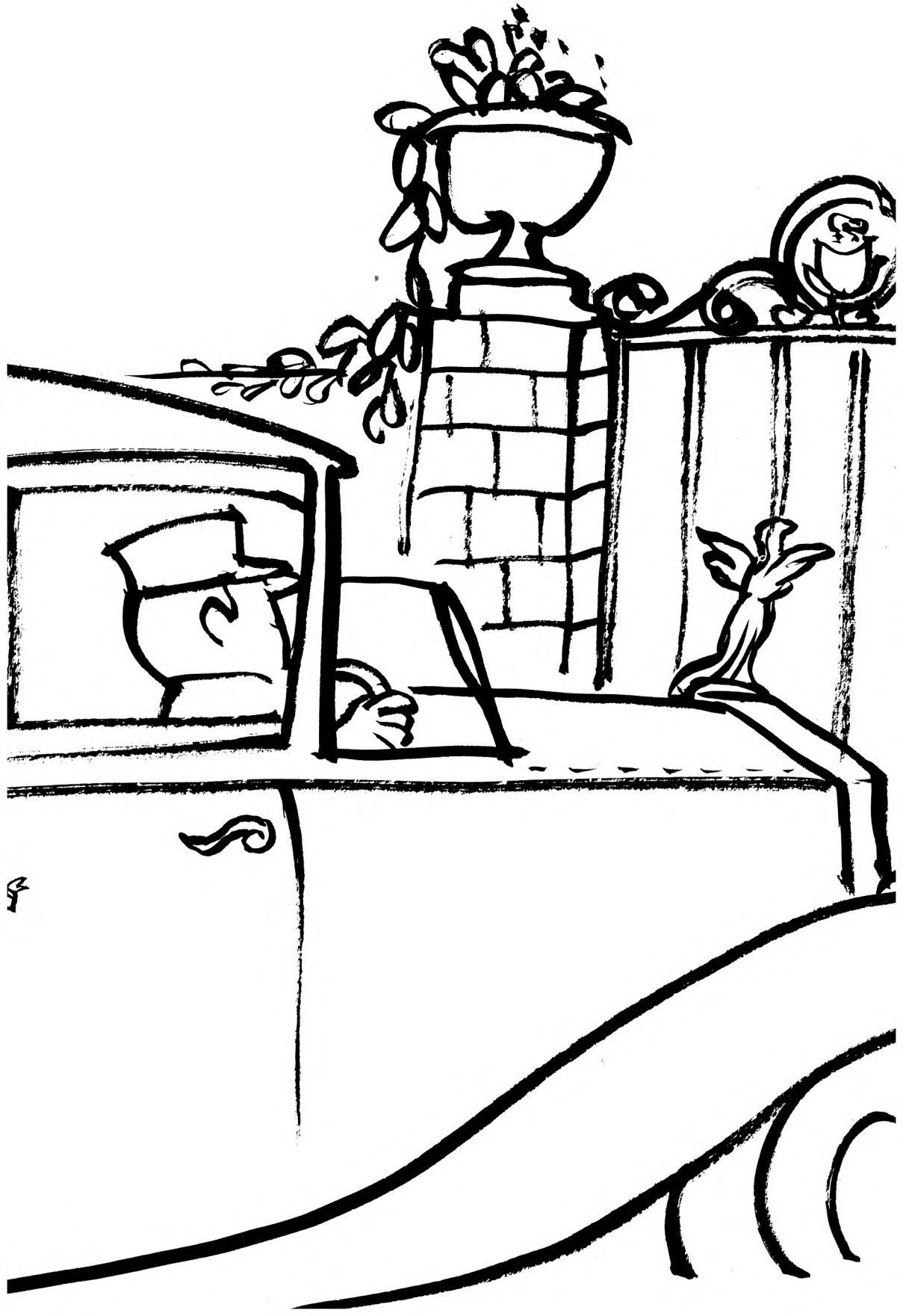






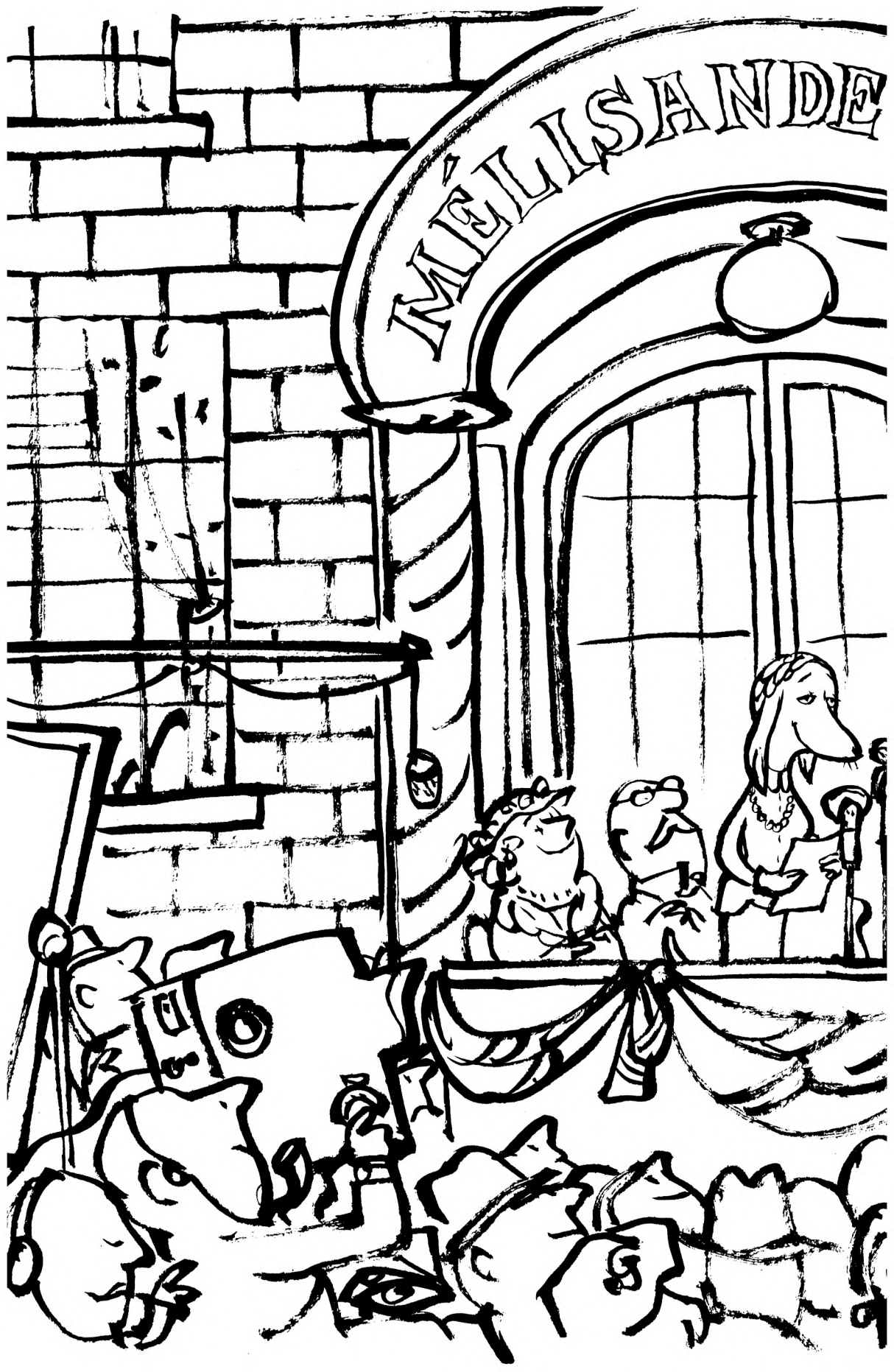






WHAT'S MY

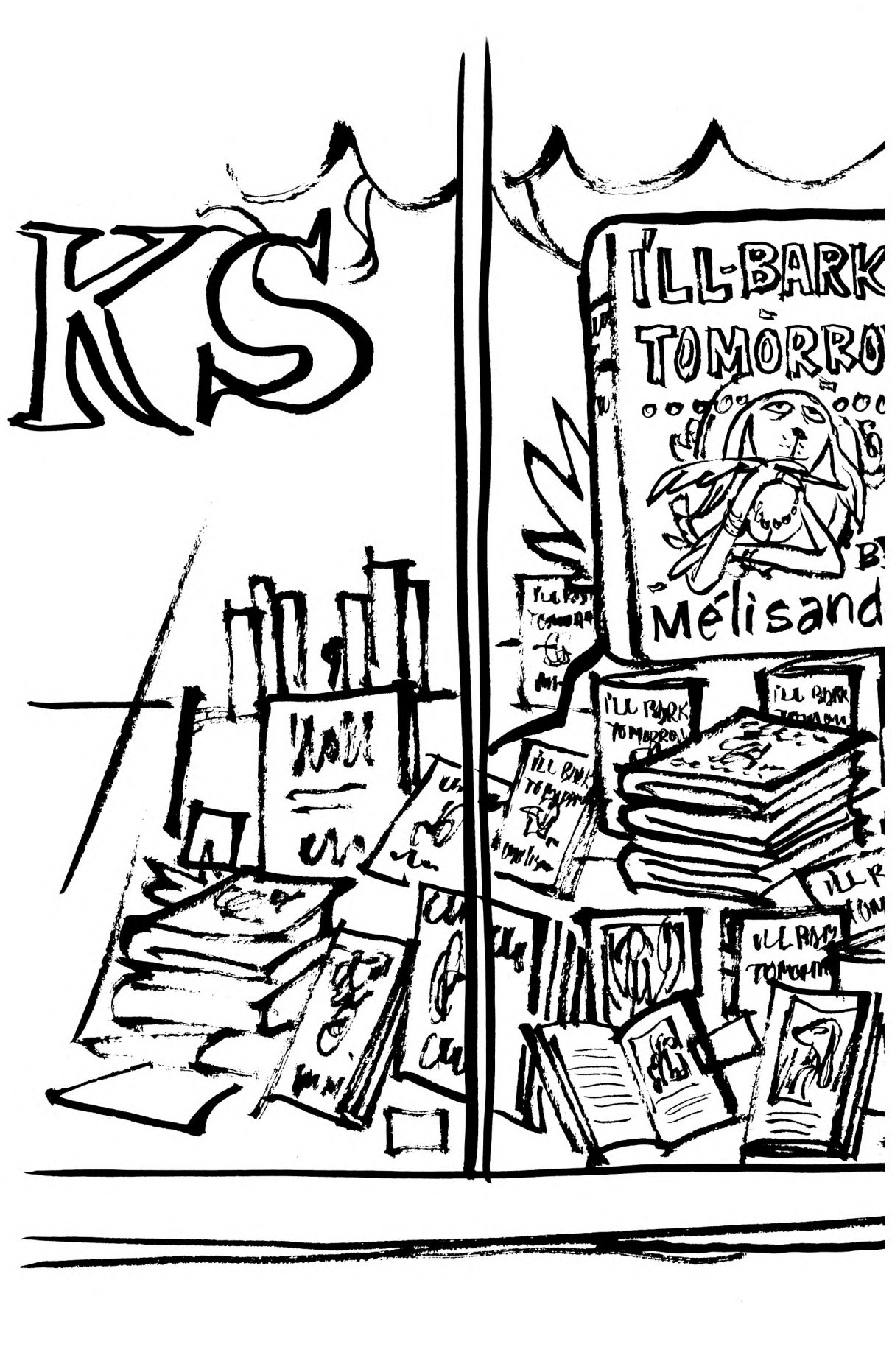
LINE?


MÉLISANDE

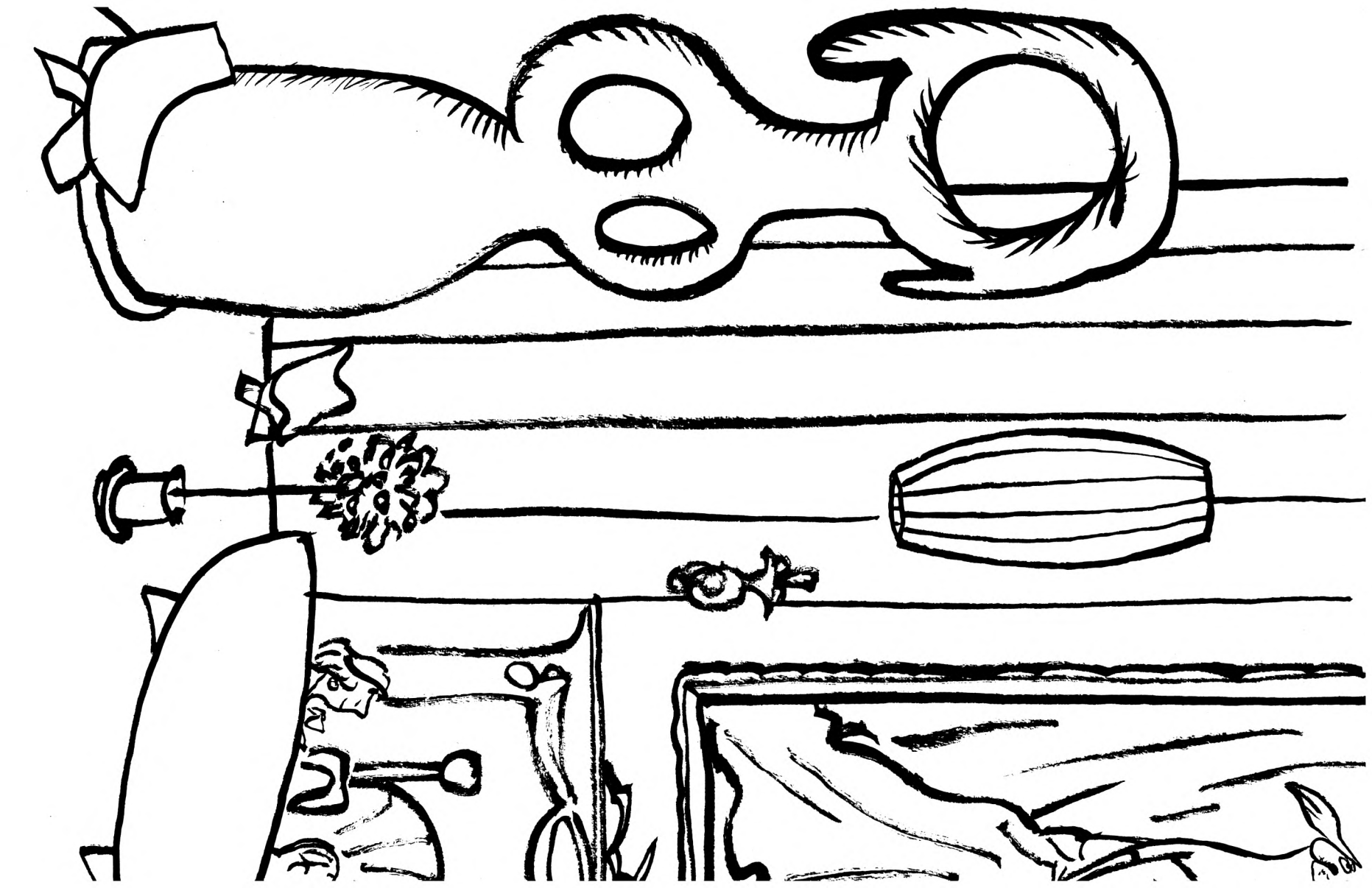
OUSE
A SHELTER FOR HOMELESS FEMALE DOGS.

LIFE

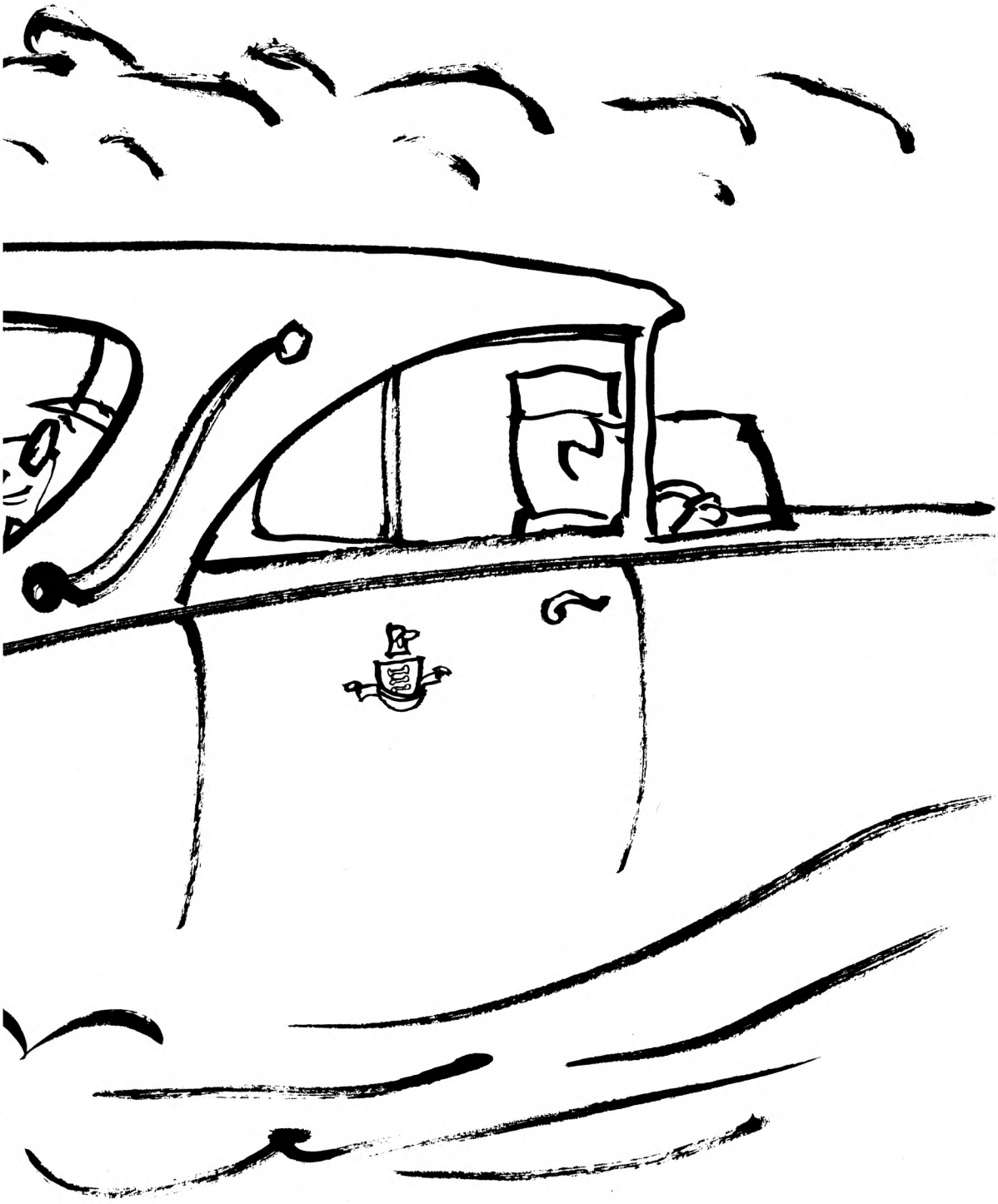
MÉLISANDE

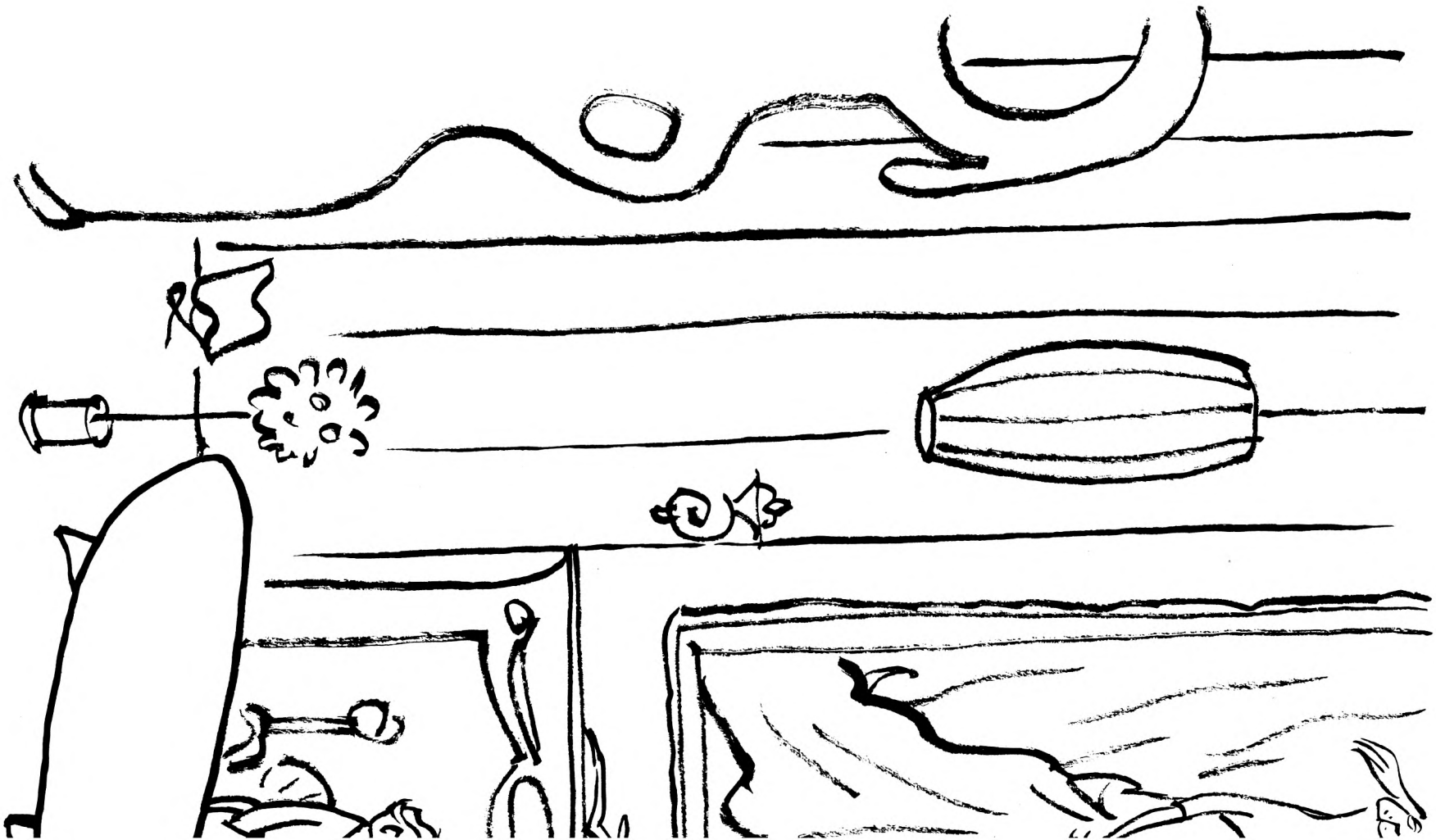

KS
I'LL BARK
TOMORRO
Mélisand

BOO
I'LL BARK TO MORROW
Mólisand



OPERA
MÉLISANDE
SOLD OUT





Contract
CONT
SACT

MELISANDE
RETIRES

mckie